



Ministry  
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# Growing With Books

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## *Book 3: About Poetry*

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*Prologue:*

*What About Poetry?*





## Prologue: What About Poetry?

Lissa Paul

Budding writers at creative-writing schools play a guessing-game called "Smoke". A person who is "it" thinks of someone famous. The others in the group have to guess who that character is. One initial clue is allowed. So the person who is it, thinking of Superman, for example, would say only "I am a fictional male."

To discover the identity of Superman (to continue the example), the people in the group have to ask the person who is "it" a series of questions that are put in the following form: "What kind of ----- are you?" The first Superman question might be, say, "What kind of animal are you?" The person who is "it" then has to respond with what kind of animal Superman would be if he were an animal (not what kind of animal Superman would like as a pet). Would Superman be a tiger? A panther? A lion? He certainly wouldn't be a rat or a rabbit!

The group continues to ask questions such as: "What kind of car are you?" "What weather?" "What flower?" "What building?" The possible variations provide wonderful "scope for the imagination" as Anne (of *Green Gables*) might say. Eventually, through collective, unconscious associations, the "smoke" clears and the identity of the character emerges.

Such a metaphor-in-action game is one dramatic way of illustrating just how powerful an image can be. And it is a demonstration of Archibald MacLeish's description of a poem: "A poem should not mean / But be."<sup>1</sup>

"Smoke" is the sort of game Diane Dawber might play in her classroom. Her personal, practical article "Poem As Car" is about reading and writing poetry as an everyday part of classroom life, not as an abstract and erudite part. Dawber does not, however, relegate poetry to the low-life sphere of doggerel, pop songs, or mnemonic. Poetry has a place in both high art and low art. As a teacher it is possible for you to make both visible to your students.

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1. Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica", *Collected Poems 1917-52* (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1952), pp. 40-41.

When teaching poetry, listen to the children in your class. Diane Dawber does. She noticed that her students were intimately familiar with dragsters, and she made them just as familiar with poems.


Familiarity with the language of poetry comes with practice, and with exposure to a wide range of poems. It does not come from point-less drills on the differences between metaphors and similes, or other such boring attempts to hammer malleable poems into fixed holes. Teachers do not have to explain poems; in fact, it is preferable not to. To quote MacLeish again: "A poem should be equal to: / Not true."<sup>2</sup>

Poetry is made up of an infinitely complex (and ultimately undefinable) constellation of sensual and visceral elements: intensely visible colours and shapes; textures you can feel; sounds with a whole orchestra full of undertones; scents that come from gardens, garbage dumps, and all kinds of places in between; and tastes somehow more exotic than ordinary ones. Poets keep trying to put their experience of the world into words. And, as readers, we keep trying to turn those words back into a revised, refreshed view of the world. That is, we keep trying to read the words well enough so that we experience the world anew.

The "meaning-of-the-poem" comes out of a vibrant resonance set up between the poem's words and the world. Responding, physically, to the powerfully charged world of poetry is something that teaches humanity more eloquently than any other form of human discourse. The pleasure of the poem comes from exploration not explanation; from the creation in the reader of a living organism that grows.

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2. Ibid.

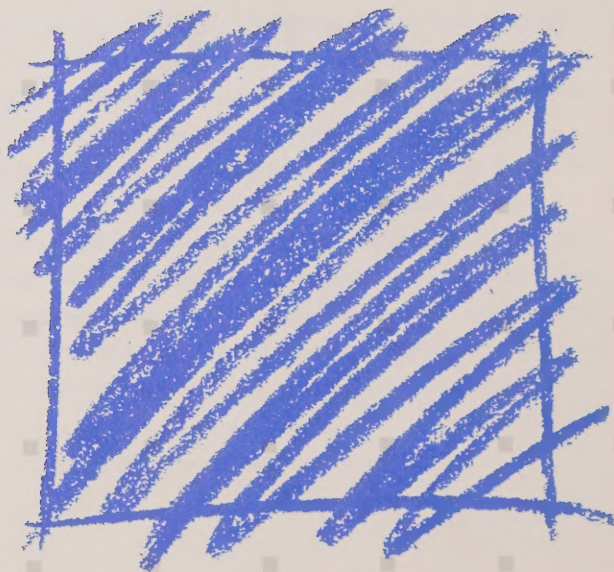


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*Inside Poetry*





## *Inside Poetry*

*Lissa Paul*

Half-way through the poem, Toby began to cry. She had been reading aloud as part of her seminar presentation in my fourth-year undergraduate children's literature class. We were all caught off guard by the intensity of her response. I have to confess that I've forgotten the poem, but I remember the moment; and I remember why the poem touched her (and us) so profoundly.

Toby had spoken to me a few days earlier about what she was going to do in her presentation. She wanted to talk about the way creativity is "civilized" out of children (she had been working with a child in whom she saw instinctive joy repressed), and she wanted to cite a poem she remembered, in a shadowy way, from her own schooldays. She knew the poem had something to do with the colour yellow and with why yellow was still her favourite colour. But she couldn't remember the poem or the author. So she called her mother long-distance to explain the situation and see if her mother could locate the book in which Toby knew the poem to be.

Toby's mother had been unaware that the poem was so important to her daughter. When she found it, the clues to its significance came to light. Her mother had once said that Toby's nursery-school paintings had always been instantly recognizable – they were exuberant, bold, and filled with sunlight – but that after Toby started school her drawings lost their individual vitality and became of a piece with those of the other children. Her mother could no longer recognize them.

Toby's creativity had been "civilized" out of her. And the enormity of the loss was revealed to Toby through the poem – in a way so immediate and so powerful that it touched us all. For that moment we were all at one with her.

I've been thinking about Toby and what happened that day in class, as I've been trying to write this article on poetry. And I've been thinking

about basic questions about the value of poetry. Questions like “Why read poetry?”, “Why write it?”, or “Why study it?” – questions that, on the face of it, look naïve or silly, especially in a book about children’s literature.

I know why I read poetry. The language of poetry often creates for me a kind of magical explosion and sets off a range of responses: joy and wonder, fear and pain – and many things in between. Poetry is very much part of my sense of what it is to be human and to share in a community of emotional response. But how is it possible to communicate that sense to anyone else? Toby’s story, I hope, gives at least a glimpse of the power of poetry to touch our most hidden and forgotten places, our human places. That’s why I’ve decided to focus this article on the human truth in poetry.

What follows is something like my journey into the landscape of poetry. Ted Hughes, poet laureate, is the guide, partly because he has had the most profound effect on my response to imaginative literature, and partly because one of his books, *Poetry in the Making*,<sup>1</sup> is, to my mind, one of the most attractive, readable, practical books available on reading and writing poetry. Originally prepared and read by Hughes for a series of BBC radio broadcasts for schools, the text retains the oral quality of the original – the living voice of a practising poet, talking seriously and without condescension about what he does and why.

Poems, says Hughes, “have their own life, like animals. . . . And they have a certain wisdom. They know something special . . . something perhaps which we are very curious to learn.” That is how he begins *Poetry in the Making*. And when he talks about making a poem come to life, he uses no thorny technical or theoretical language. He says simply that

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1. Ted Hughes, *Poetry in the Making* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969). Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

poems are “an assembly of living parts moved by a single spirit. The living parts are the words, the images, the rhythms. The spirit is the life which inhabits them when they all work together.” That’s all. Then he explains how to do that:

Words that live are those which we hear, like “click” or “chuckle”, or which we see, like “freckled” or “veined”, or which we taste, like “vinegar” or “sugar”, or touch, like “prickle” or “oily”, or smell, like “tar” or “onion”. Words which belong directly to one of the five senses. Or words which act and seem to use their muscles, like “flick” or “balance”.<sup>2</sup>

When Ted Hughes tells it, it sounds easy enough. Just “imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it . . . Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it . . . You keep your eyes, your ears, your nose, your taste, your touch, your whole being on the thing you are turning into words”.<sup>3</sup> The problem is that most of us can’t keep up that kind of concentration. Besides, we’re usually so repressed that we opt for the familiar and the conventional responses, right answers instead of true ones.

But children and real poets have an advantage. Their responses to the world are less conditioned – more fluid – than our grown-up ones usually are. When you are talking about poetry with children, or when you write it with them, the trick is to open up, not close down, possible ways of experiencing the world. And that is one of the things poetry is – it is about looking at the world around us, experiencing it so clearly and acutely that we connect it instantly with emotional response, then look out again at the world with new eyes.

Ted Hughes often does that – makes things that I don’t really see come to life in unexpected ways. In his most recent book for children,

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2. Ibid., p. 17.

3. Ibid., p. 18.

*What Is the Truth?: A Farmyard Fable for the Young*, the rightness of his vision often catches me with an unexpected sense of shock. Here is Hughes on cows:

I think  
There's a summer ocean liner in cows –  
Majestic and far off,  
With a quiet mysterious delight,  
Fading through the blue afternoon.

And there's a ruined holy city  
In a herd of lying down, cud-chewing cows –  
Noses raised, eyes nearly closed  
They are fragments of temples – even their outlines  
Still at an angle unearthly.<sup>4</sup>

It would never occur to me to see cows as ocean liners, or as “a ruined holy city”. But Hughes identifies – sees – something in cows that was not visible to me until he brought it to my attention. I'll think of these lines the next time I see cows – and think about cows with more respect, too. I'll see something beyond the random marks in a field, glanced at and forgotten as I go tearing down Highway 401.

How to put that knowledge into the classroom? Reading first. The chances are that if you choose a poem with the sensual qualities Hughes talks about – a poem that can be seen, touched, tasted, smelled and/or heard – it will be a poem the children can accommodate.

Now writing. Poetry is about making – in fact that is the original meaning of the word, so the title and subject matter of Hughes's book are particularly apt.

Hughes suggests you choose an object or an animal or anything else that is of interest to you and your class. Have the students first focus on it, then write about it as quickly and spontaneously as they can. Set a time limit (Hughes recommends ten minutes). The only rule is that each fresh thought gets a new line. In my own experience, it is a good idea for the

4. Ted Hughes, *What Is the Truth?: A Farmyard Fable for the Young* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), unpagged. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.



teacher to write with the students, under the same conditions. Share your work with them as they share theirs with you. Don't be surprised if they write better poetry – more visceral, less conditioned, less artificial, and less self-conscious – than you do.

One of my own undergraduate students who tried this technique with her Grade 3 class recounted a lovely story about what the children taught her. They all wrote animal poems. Beverly (their teacher) confessed to the class when they had finished that she wasn't very happy with the beginning of her poem, that she had tried to restart it several times to get it right, but that it didn't seem to get any better. The students sympathized. Then they explained that when they had the same problem, they just brought the animal they were trying to write about back into their minds and wrote from the picture. Beverly understood. The children got it right. While Beverly had been trying to write in an orderly fashion by getting the words to arrange themselves correctly, the children simply went back to the source and made the picture speak. A good lesson – for poets and teachers and children.

The children in Beverly's class taught her about looking beyond words to the thing itself. That has a lot to do with addressing the question of what poetry is. In a (spring 1984) letter to me, Hughes says that poetry "is simply the name we give to a certain kind of writing. The closer that kind of writing gets to a total (instantaneous) release – something that satisfies & reinforces & appeases the whole organism – the more intense, as poetry, it seems to be." He is talking about poetry in absolutely physical terms: words that change the way we experience the world. In an interview, Hughes says that a line from a poem by John Crowe Ransom – "Tawny are the leaves turned but they still hold" – made his "hair stand on end" when he first read it.<sup>5</sup>

Other poets share Hughes's sense of the power of poetry to disturb us physically. Here is Emily Dickinson: "If I read a book and it makes my

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5. Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 211.

whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that it is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that it is poetry.”<sup>6</sup>

For these poets, then, words make experience resonate emotionally, internally. About *Poetry in the Making*, Hughes says (again in the letter previously quoted) that he wanted “to direct readers (listeners) towards certain faculties – inner concentration, inner listening. A deliberate sort of self-exposure to an event – an inner event”.

If this description of poetry sounds more like magic than language arts, there is good reason. In other times, in other places, poets were magical people, the life-blood of the community. Shamans and medicine men knew the “secret names”, the “true names” of things and people, and possessed power over them. Medieval heroic poets were the keepers of all the social codes and genealogies of the community. Sufi poets were believed to cure the sick by finding the right stories to speak to the patient’s illness. Words had, and to some extent, even in our society, still have, the power to charm, to cast spells. Even though poetry isn’t as essential to our high-tech mind-sets as in the past, traces of its power linger. Just listen to children in a playground promising to keep a secret. They use poetry, and they respect the power of words – even if they don’t exactly believe in it.

Now, despite the rather mystical tone of this discussion, I’m not abandoning the need to know about (the often ancient and ritualistic) formal structures. I’m saying that a skilled poet knows how to use them to make his words live. And a skilled reader who knows how to see and understand those structures knows why the poem is alive. There is power in knowledge. For instance, in Dylan Thomas’s “Do not go gentle into that good night”, the refrain lines ring with taut rage throughout the poem – as if trapped, ringing against the bars of a cage. Thomas makes you feel that rage by setting the poem as a villanelle, and letting the

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6. E. Dickinson, cited in C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 3rd ed. (New York: Odyssey Press, 1972), s.v. “poetry”.

refrain lines themselves say and shape the felt rage. The first set of refrain lines – “Do not go gentle into that good night” (lines 1, 6, 12, and 18) ricochets off the second set – “Rage, rage against the dying of the light” (lines 3, 9, 15, and 19). And this all happens in the tight compass of the nineteen-line poem.<sup>7</sup>

In the same way, a poem that begins, “There was an old person of Dean / Who dined on one pea, and one bean”, makes it reasonably clear that the rest of the poem is going to be funny. You actually know, because you recognize the rhythm and rhyme scheme of the poem as the kind used in nonsense verse, that it will probably be nonsense: a limerick. In this case the poem is by that master of nonsense, Edward Lear, and it concludes, impenetrably enough: “For he said, ‘More than that / Would make me too fat,’ / That cautious old person of Dean.”<sup>8</sup>

Structures and shapes can convey something of the meaning and feeling in poems, and discussions about structure don’t have to be boring and disconnected from sense. Neither do other formal aspects of poetry. Like metaphors. As Hughes says about metaphor in *Poetry in the Making*:

A comparison is like a little puzzle. . . . You are forced to look more closely, and to think, and make distinctions, and be surprised at what you find – and all this adds to the strength and vividness of your final impression. And it all happens in a flash.<sup>9</sup>

A metaphor forces the imagination (of both the reader and the writer) into action, compels it to make connections between things – as, for example, when Hughes makes his readers think about the cows as “ocean liners” and “temples”.

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7. D. Thomas, “Do not go gentle into that good night”, in *The Rattle Bag*, edited by T. Hughes and S. Heaney (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), pp. 131-32.

8. E. Lear, “There was an old person of Dean”, in *Oxford Book of Poetry for Children*, compiled by E. Blishen (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1984), p. 11.

9. T. Hughes, *Poetry in the Making*, p. 44.

To write and to read poetry is to engage actively in the exploration of our common humanity. To do that the writer focuses on the world in which he or she lives and trusts that the right words will surface. In his letter to me Hughes says that in *Poetry in the Making* he was not saying “‘study writing’, but ‘practise writing’, as diving to depths has to be practised. The whole business is closer to athletics than aesthetics, perhaps”. A poem is alive if all the senses of writer and reader are alert.

Why should we expose children to poetry, or to any form of imaginative literature? Hughes says that poetry is a way that man struggles “to possess his own experience, in other words to regain his genuine self”. Words are the way we do that.

Words that will express something of the deep complexity that makes us precisely the way we are, from the momentary effect of the barometer to the force that created men distinct from trees. Something of the inaudible music that moves us along in our bodies from moment to moment like water in a river. Something of the spirit of the snowflake in the water of the river. Something of the duplicity and the relativity and the merely fleeting quality of all this. Something of the almighty importance of it and something of the utter meaninglessness. And when words can manage something of this, and manage it in a moment of time, and in that same moment make out of it all the vital signature of a human being – not of an atom, or of a geometrical diagram, or of a heap of lenses – but a human being, we call it poetry.<sup>10</sup>

That’s what poetry is – for me anyway, today.

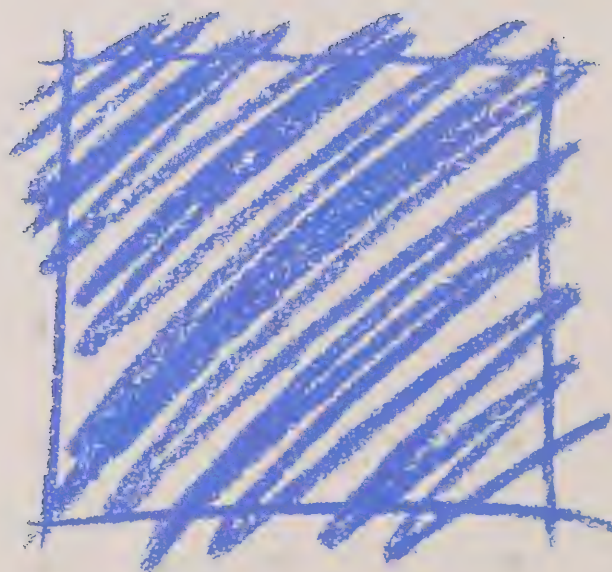
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10. T. Hughes, *Poetry in the Making*, p. 124.





*Poem As Car*





## Poem As Car

Diane Dawber

Danny looked up from his drawing as I passed. He smiled. I smiled back and stopped to admire the fantastic dragster in his picture. If only Danny could feel as comfortable with poems as he could with dragsters!

As I went on to other students, an idea, well, really just a phrase, began to repeat in my head. "Poem as car, poem as car...." It wouldn't go away.

It usually pays to examine the images that come to us at odd moments. So I did. Poem as car? Hmmm. If poems were as familiar as lunchtime traffic, as exciting as a Grand Prix race, and at least as understandable as the internal combustion engine, then maybe Danny would be writing dragster poems to go with his dragster pictures.

Why do children draw cars? Perhaps because cars are so familiar and so associated with what adults do. I set out to make poems as familiar as the automobile, at least as far as I was able.

The first thing you will see upon entering my classroom, or even before you get there, are displays of poems. Walls, bulletin boards, chart stands, windows, and cupboard doors may all have poems attached to them. If it's Hallowe'en there may be spooky or pumpkin poems. If someone has lost a tooth or a friend, there may be lost tooth or friend poems. If it's the first bright day of spring, there are poems about that, too. Are you studying simple machines? No problem:

There once was a large scary bully  
Who made everyone's muscles feel woolly.  
A small lad with a rope  
Showed that he was no dope  
As he hauled up the brute with a pulley.

Long division?

Oh pity the poor dividend  
Attacked by divisors who rend.  
When he's cut up in pieces  
The division then ceases  
And the quotient numbers stretchers do send.



Poems help us out. They may not be great poems, only verses with catchy rhymes or silly images, but they're there to see. Simple machines and long division have never seemed the same.

Sometimes you can find posters with a poem appropriate to your need; or a calendar that has a poem with matching illustrations. If not, it doesn't take much effort to copy a poem onto chart paper and pull out a picture from your file to go with it. Of course, if you have calligraphic or artistic talents, so much the better. I am no artist, but my students enjoyed the simple magic-marker cartoons I made to accompany the limericks quoted above.

If you're pressed for time – and what teacher isn't? – before long your students will be wanting to take copying and illustrating jobs from you. All you will have to do is referee turns and keep materials on hand.

If you and your students are going to find suitable poems, it is necessary to have lots of sources on hand. Keep anthologies of work by many different writers or by single authors on your shelf of books for silent reading. Songbooks, sheet music, and hymnbooks are other possible sources. Or keep a collection of albums with the words to the songs by the record player. Old greeting cards and cutouts of advertisements provide verses, whatever we think of their literary quality and the commercial degradation of art. What we are trying to show is that poetry crops up in many places in the world, not just in school, not just in literature class.

The sneaky part comes next. It's great to have poetry displayed in your own classroom, but that still doesn't prove that poetry is acceptable in the whole wide world outside of school. What we have to do is spread it around. We once sent a poem to the principal about the standardized tests we had just finished. It had a lot in it about seeing dots before our eyes. He put it up in his office.

We sent a poem to the secretary about the downpour on the first day of school that happened right at lunchtime dismissal and caused traffic jams. She hung hers up too.

The chiropractor who visited to tell us about bones and muscles now has one of our poems in his waiting room. So does the store on the Tyendinaga Reserve where we went to spend the day.

The visiting percussion group who came to perform went away with a poem about their drums. Another teacher who let us go on a hike in his woods has a poem about some very strange and mysterious creatures we just might have met there. We might have to send a poem to the class in Africa who are going to be our pen pals. If only we had thought to send one to Marc Garneau, our poetry could have gone into orbit.

Poems to look at are only so involving. Like the car in the auto museum or dealer's showroom, there is only so much you can learn by looking. To learn more you have to test-drive it.

There are disagreements about the models that should be test-driven. All I can say is that I would not expect new drivers to take out the most valuable antiques in the museum or the most expensive racing cars available. They might get home safely; then again, they might not. I would go for a good, reliable, easy-to-handle, relatively inexpensive model. It won't go too fast for the driver's experience, there aren't a lot of gadgets to worry about, and a small bump or scratch is not going to be the end of the world. The new drivers should be aware of the museum and racing varieties – and probably are; but there's no need to pile on the pressure when steering and going sixty kilometres an hour are plenty thrill enough.

Poems written for children within the last ten years should probably be relevant, and if the anthology is for children one would hope that the selection is sound. Read it yourself. If you don't understand the poems, chances are that many of your young people won't either.



Analogies are never exact but thinking of the poem as car puts the debate about giving classics to novices in a reasonable light. All sorts of poetry should be made available, but I don't expect students to really understand or enjoy the classics without having had much experience with simpler models first.


There are many ways to test-drive a poem. I have recited a favourite poem to the class or read it to them. The presentation may be casual or complete with props and costumes. The students have brought in poems, sometimes memorized, sometimes read, to present at sharing time, on special occasions, or just before recess. Invite a poet, songwriter, or advertising writer to visit and read or recite favourite or original works to the class. If that is not possible, the listening centre may contain tapes of poetry being read. There are many excellent tapes and records available. Or make tapes of yourself or your students reading a favourite, prepared poem. There are endless possibilities.

Another way of involving students in poetry is to let them manage the displays or centres in the room. Many students are studying calligraphy these days, and what better way to use their talents than by having them copy poems for all of us to enjoy? This is a good chance for illustration too.

Once students are encouraged to find appropriate poems, they will come up with many treasures. You will be surprised to find how many have a parent, aunt, uncle, or cousin who writes and has published poetry. You will also be surprised to find how many families have favourite poems that have been shared for generations.

Up until now I have skirted the subject of writing poetry. Writing poetry is a lot like building and repairing cars. It scares some people to death. There are many brave souls who aren't afraid, but that is no help to those who are. But writing is important. To really know poetry one must get into the mechanics of it.





Think of it this way. Are there many children who are afraid to build a soapbox car? Not on your life! It doesn't even have to have wheels to let the child have hours of fun whizzing down imaginary roads.

Writing poetry is a lot like that. You don't have to come up with a masterpiece on your first attempt. Working with computers has taught us that it is not a disaster to make a mistake. One just has to go back and try to correct or debug the program. The same is true of poetry. Poets would be petrified with fright if they thought that the next words written down would be famous for generations. A poet writes and writes and out of it all may come a few lines worth keeping for posterity, maybe not. The point is to do it or there is no chance at all.

Students can learn a lot just by watching you try. Take the chalk and work on a limerick or a funny couplet about something that has just happened. The others can be doing some reading or their own writing. If you feel reasonably comfortable about doing so, let them ask questions or make suggestions. Use the overhead projector one day, chart paper the next. Get the group to compose a thank-you verse for a visitor. Donald Graves, in *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*,<sup>1</sup> includes many suggestions with examples about ways these things can be done. There is no one right way, just lots of good possibilities.

You may have concerns about how you should talk about poems. Some teachers teach all the sophisticated vocabulary from trochaic trimeter to metonymy, while others teach none. In my view, the best solution lies somewhere in between. Some of us can just about manage to ask for the gas tank to be filled, the oil checked, and the windshield cleaned; others are fluent about compression ratios and torque conversions. Some of us can talk about poetry only in simple terms; others are at home with a more complicated vocabulary. Most of us can talk about the image and the rhythm and the connections to life that we see in a poem,

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1. Donald Graves, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (London: Heinemann, 1981).



but few will go on to a technical discussion of the language and meaning constructions. In any poem it is a great deal to talk about the picture, the sound, and the relation of the poem to our own experience. Sometimes when you are writing a poem it becomes necessary to identify what is producing the effect or blocking it and more technical terms may be required. The mechanic needs to know about the tie rod ends, but the driver may only need to know that the steering seems off.

The most fun I have had from thinking of the poem as car is thinking of the models that some of my favourite poets might write. Can you think of Al Purdy in a "'57 Chev" of a poem? Or Dennis Lee in a bright yellow Volkswagen from which innumerable clowns emerge? Or Margaret Atwood in an air-conditioned compact? T. S. Eliot is surely a well-used Bentley. The possibilities are as endless as the imaginations of children and teachers and poets.

The supreme success, as far as I am concerned, is this dragster poem:



by Danny



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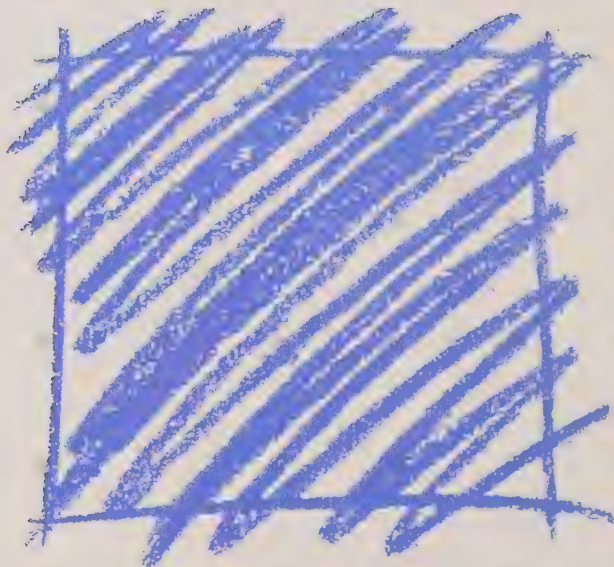





*Epilogue:*

*Poetry As Something You Want*

*to Do, Not Something You Have to Do*





## *Epilogue: Poetry As Something You Want to Do, Not Something You Have to Do*

*Lissa Paul*

Because the articles in this section offer many practical ways of putting poetry into classrooms, only their basic tenets need restatement here. Begin by making poetry a part of life – your life, the life of the classroom, everyday life. Be aware that poetry belongs to both high culture and popular culture.

Have the children in your class bring in poems they like. Buy books of poetry, borrow them from the library, and subscribe to, or at least read, a journal that publishes poetry. (There are lots of suitable small Canadian literary magazines: *Canadian Literature*, *Open Letter*, *Poetry Toronto*, *Canadian Forum*, for example. Libraries and some bookstores carry them. Or try the Canadian Periodical Association for further information.) Read poetry and be seen to read poetry. Encourage the children in your class to bring in poems that please them. Bring in poems you like; poems you want to share. Be able to acknowledge puzzlement. If you don't understand something, say so. The children in your class might be able to help.

On the assumption that you and your students are comfortable enough to talk about poetry, you ought to write it as well as read it. In struggling with the problems of composition readers are put in touch with writers. This brings us back to the importance of revision. Finding the right words/images/rhythms/metaphors/verse forms is important. Encourage your students to revise their work, but be sensitive to the fact that you are supposed to be nurturing writers – not stunting their growth. Focus on success rather than failure. The process has something in common with growing a good lawn. By encouraging the grass you can crowd out the crabgrass and the weeds.

Words are important. They have histories, geographies, ancestries, rhythms, and tonalities. Treat them with respect. Children are not frightened or put off by words they don't know. As teachers, we can help students learn to delight in new words, to enjoy their taste, to feel triumphant in their possession.

In-class exercises ought to take the meanings of words into account. But words also have aural and visual qualities. To explore the aural qualities, try sound poetry. In-class projects could range from single-sound chants (for example, the mantra "om") to whole stories told in a language the children make up themselves. How would a primitive person – someone without formal spoken or written language – convey a complex set of ideas or instructions to a group? For example, how would you tell a group of hunters that there is a giant mammoth lurking in the woods? And that if they sneak up behind it and throw a spear at its heart they can eat mammoth steaks for dinner?

Ask questions: What do sounds look like? What does a landscape sound like? You might consider playing a recording of sound poets. The Four Horsemen are a Canadian group with a number of records to their credit.<sup>1</sup> Or you might try to find a recording of Inuit throat singers.

Now to poems as pictures. Meanings of poems come from their shapes as well as their sounds. To focus on shape, look at concrete poems. Poets are very conscious of the physical dimensions of words – bp nichol, for instance, often plays out a single word in a variety of

1. For example, The Four Horsemen, *Canadada*. Griffin House, 88760 036 0.

shapes and sizes. Or you and your students might try to make sense of this concrete poem by Earle Birney:

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d      •      d
e      e
i      t      e
d      h      n
o b      e      e s
      m      o
      e      i b s      t
      s      t      e      i
      i      u
      d f o m o s q
      T E
      O B

a r c s f i n g
t      •      •      e
c      •      r
h      s
e      o
d      f
t y b      p o e t
h      r
e      y2

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2. E. Birney, "First Aid", *The Cow Jumped Over the Moon* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 102.

Metaphor can be approached in two ways. You can use the “smoke” approach, as outlined in the introduction to this section. Or you might ask some riddles. There are some good examples of riddle poems in the Puffin Collection of nursery rhymes. Riddles usually work on the same principle as metaphors – you have to be able to see two different things at once. They are rather like “smoke” in reverse: a series of metaphors gradually builds into a picture, as in the following riddle poem by John Cotton:

Insubstantial I can fill lives,  
Cathedrals, worlds.  
I can haunt islands,  
Raise passions  
Or calm the madness of kings.  
I’ve even fed the affectionate.  
I can’t be touched or seen,  
But I can be noted.<sup>3</sup>

The answer, in case you haven’t guessed, is music. Your students can probably provide you with similar examples.

Reading and writing poetry can help students develop the same skills we have been stressing – attention to the words on the page, to what the author says and the reader sees, to the importance of detail, to the art and craft of selection, and to taking pride in something one makes. With skill, luck, effort, and goodwill it might just be possible to turn out a generation of poetry readers and writers.

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3. John Cotton, “Totleigh Riddles”, in V. A. Fanthorpe, J. Cotton, and L. J. Anderson, *The Crystal Zoo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 7. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.





## *Bibliography*

